

The Recruit(s): Learning the Basics

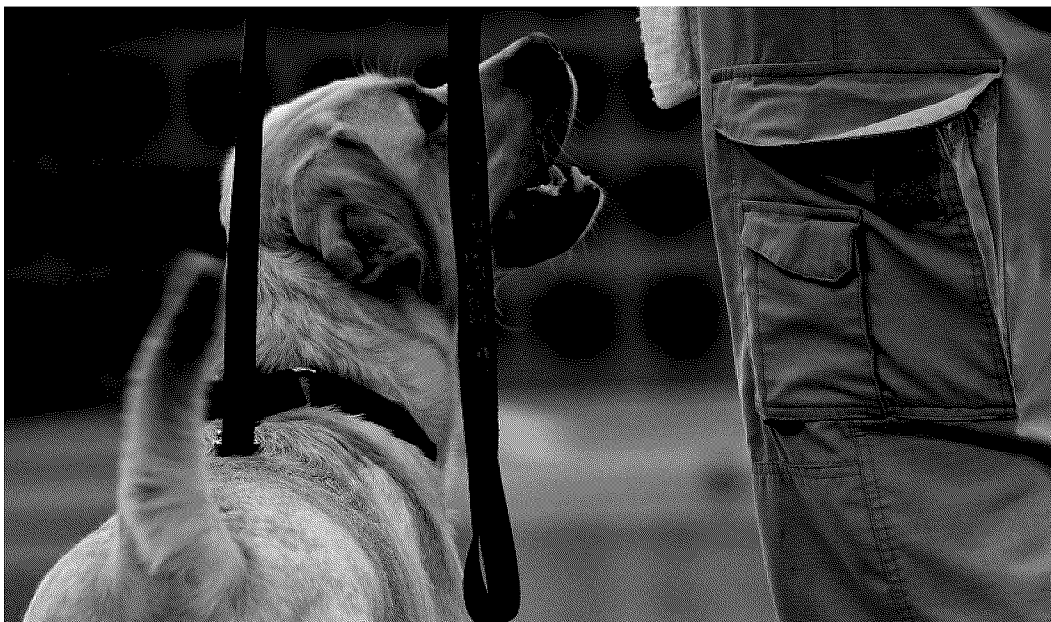


The six puppies in CIA's fall class – Suni, Heide, Freya, Lulu, Nicole, and Indigo – have no previous explosive detection training. So how do you teach a dog to find a bomb? You start with the basics.

As the sun rises, Andy—the lead instructor for the fall class—and his training partner Steve, prepare CIA's training center for the pups' first lesson. They'll do three lessons a day, every day, throughout the program.



CIA's training program for new "puppy classes" lasts a total of 16 weeks. Classes are held seven days a week, even on holidays. The first six weeks the pups are focused on imprint training at our training center. Directly following those six weeks, the dogs will be paired with handlers and the new teams will undergo another 10 weeks of advanced training.



The first few days of imprint training are spent in what the instructors call "the booth" – a small square area separated from the main training room by three, 4-foot-high cement walls and a

gate. The back of the booth is made of cinder blocks, with the openings exposed to hide small tins with odors for the dogs to find.



Day one is spent teaching the pups the concept of sniffing on command.

A small round tin with holes in top is filled with a scent.



The trainer presents the tin to a pup who, out of curiosity, sniffs it. The trainer then erupts into squeals of delight (sometimes cartoon voices too), jumps around, and praises the pup like the dog just found a pot of gold. Then the pup gets some kibbles of dog food, followed by a lot of pats, rubs, and maybe even a game of tug-of-war... whatever the dog loves and gets excited about.



This process is repeated 35-45 times in a row. If the pup gets distracted or becomes disinterested, it's up to the trainer to find a way to get the dog excited and happy to keep sniffing the tin.



The trainers' number one rule: make it fun. "If the dog makes the decision to do a desired behavior on its own," says Dennis, the head trainer of CIA's K9 unit, "they learn more, rather than the trainer making them do it."

That's why our program uses only food-based, positive reinforcement training methods.



The goal of day one? "Get the dogs to seek out the tin for a sniff on their own," says Andy. "You want the dogs to start figuring things out, so whenever they give even the smallest try, they get a reward."



The pups figure out within minutes that if they show interest in the little metal can that Andy or Steve is holding, they'll receive a kibble of food. What they sometimes miss is that they need to sniff the can, not paw it or lick it or push it like a button.

"Listen for the sniff," instructs Andy. "When you hear the big inhale, that's when you know they're picking up the scent and not just nosing the can."



Andy emphasizes that during the first week of training, the most important thing the trainers look for is a change in the dog's behavior – whether it's a tilt of the dog's head, drooling, a pause in movement, anything that indicates the dog has caught the desired scent and is paying attention to it. Then reward like crazy. And repeat, repeat, repeat.

"Gotta keep them interested and engaged," says Andy.



The next two to three days will be spent the same way; teaching the pups to sniff a tin the handlers are holding for a reward. Once they're solid on that, they'll learn a second scent.

Training moves fast after this. In less than six weeks, the pups will be able to successfully detect more than 20,000 different explosive mixtures!



PHOTO CAPTION: At the end of every training day, the pups get a special treat: A huge dog cookie! Nicole excitedly bounds after hers.

What will the dogs learn next? Now that the pups know their first explosive odors, the trainers can teach them how to “seek” and to safely indicate that they’ve discovered a “hot.”

If you miss any of the articles in this series, visit [“Follow CIA’s New Puppy Class!”](#) main page, where we are chronicling the puppies’ progresses throughout their training.